

Merry-Go-Round

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The nuns regretted cracking the windows to admit the last fresh air of the season: in came calliope music. But first: *testing, testing* two blocks away while homework was chalked to the board, before any of the bells announced exit: *testing, testing*. The voice immediate and dark, the voice *testing*.

The nuns complained to the priest in charge of the school about the music but the hardware store owner who hired the rig gave and would give more said the priest who blessed himself twice just in case it wasn't true—he loved the merry-go-round, hearing the music made him forgive people faster. The nuns had to demur for the three days of free rides the man offered to us all, parochial or public, the nuns gave up and one even took a ride herself, her habit flapping.

Released in lines by class and gender, we ran down the street all mixed up, dodging Mrs. Red Lips who held out apples that color from her broken step between us and the lot filled with the merry-go-round. *Monkey mouth*, some sang out, in honor of the wrinkles that drew the lipstick so far up her face. At least she smiled is what I decided, old enough not to scream if she took a step closer. She was deaf and unlike other neighbors, thrilled to the screaming kids running past her place, hellbent for the merry-go-round.

Carousel, laughed someone I hated. The jostling began between the public school kids and those who knew the difference, until anonymous want replaced particular hate. But everyone wanted tickets as bad and as quick as they wanted away from those lips. Plus I wanted to touch the hardware store owner's son's hand who held the tickets.

Tall with a shadow over his top lip that caused the ruckus in me, he worked for my father during school holidays and summers and showed it in biceps that big, from lifting and setting down hay bales. My new hired hand, said my father when the boy appeared at our door some earlier evening for a check and a handshake, eyes as downcast as now, both mine and his.

He voiced the *testing, testing* along with taking up tickets. Hearing him, I tingled in my seat, and once on the lot I hung around his periphery, not shoving, careful to be seen with the not-shovers, and thus not getting many rides. He had to step forward and offer me one, which I received with a duck of my head, my idea of gracious. I relinquished this ticket to his father, the ticket taker who yelled right in my ear that no one should move once we were seated, or jump on after the spinning got started. The rules, he said, which words framed two gold teeth around a very big smile. We saddled up and then saddled up again: too many of us on one side and the platter that supported the horses would tip and scrape at the asphalt and cause sparks—and burst into flames, said one of the boys who pushed and shoved into seats better for himself.

I always picked a grey, the most distinguished-looking stead—stead, that's what I called them since they were wooden—and I rode sidesaddle. My mother wouldn't let me wear culottes, so I was stuck with a skirt. I also had a mouthful of braces, red pointy glasses, and a braid, a single long brown one that snapped my face if I turned my head too fast. Whenever the merry-go-round got going, I snapped it.

Didn't he see me?

One of the others said that must hurt.

Sometimes he asked those who waited if they liked algebra or if they played baseball or how

loud could they shout. He was popular then which he wasn't otherwise, hunkering to school with his muscles tired from hauling bales, with algebra homework so far behind I'd heard no one could help him.

I knew nothing of x.

Around and around I rode for as many rides as possible, given that I had to get off and repeat my reticence. Others boasted of how many they took, of how often they had fooled the ticket taker into thinking they had waited in line. The father didn't really care. He had a soft heart and loved all the fuss, down to the oiling of the horses that squeaked. Good for the hardware business! Eventually it got dark and kids had to practice piano or have their fillings looked at or rake leaves and it was easier to get tickets. Twice I suffered punishment at home for my neglect of piano and the leaves—thank goodness, my teeth were fine. I whipped my braid around in the cold of this dark until I was red in the cheeks. Did the son noticed how red they were, like a grown woman's? But not too grown, not like the red of Mrs. Red Lips.

On the last day I slapped my cheek with my braid once to get the son's attention. He was taking up tickets as fast as he could, to boast the best year ever, and I think he thought I meant No I didn't want one. I looked off into the distance hoping he would guess instead Yes, where I was surprised to see my father getting out of his pickup. To catch me? No, he talked to the son about something and was soon gone. I basked in this suggestion of familiarity, imagining much envy, my father walking me down the aisle toward the hardware man's son in a tuxedo. But he left. I loitered after the mechanics had broken the horses off their steel underparts, looking for him. I loitered thinking he'd be back after the big truck that brought the merry-go-round hauled the rig and its horses

away, creaking, down Main Street. Eventually I had to take the shortcut home in a hurry, ignoring even the sirens of emergency a few blocks away.

I had missed dinner but I didn't get punished. My father came home even later. When I asked why he showed up at the merry-go-round, he said he had to tell the boy that he didn't need a helper this winter. Not enough to do. But the boy didn't understand. My father said he just stood there, flexing his muscles, almost crying. Crying, said my father who couldn't swallow the boy's shame at being let go, just didn't believe it—nor his death. He said he shot a gun off in his mouth a while later, one his father sold in the hardware store.

It was my fault. I had teased the son, my braid whipping, so standoffish and flirty. I should have studied those x's and done his homework. I should have taken his hand and said how much I liked his *testing*. My father said the boy was good help, that wasn't the problem. I was too young to know that guilt spins centrifugal after a suicide, but I never rode another one of those horses.